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ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 201330Z APR 09  
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2967  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 001003

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STATE ALSO FOR PRM/ECA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/20/2019  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [RS](#) [GG](#)  
SUBJECT: RUSSIA BLAMED FOR BLEAK SOUTH OSSETIA CIRCUMSTANCES

Classified By: A/DCM Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In a recent spate of reports on the situation in South Ossetia, the Russian print and internet media painted a bleak picture of post-conflict living conditions and allowed discontent with Russia to shine through. The press noted the lack of aid and ineffectiveness of reconstruction efforts due to corruption, and via quotes from the locals accused the Russian government of driving the region's inhabitants to despair by its multiple blunders and actions of the demoralized Russian army. The chances for IDPs to return to their homes are dwindling as their houses are destroyed or given to Russian "specialists." End Summary.

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Where is the Russian aid?  
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¶2. (SBU) In a recent spate of reports on the situation in South Ossetia, the Russian print and internet media has painted a bleak picture of post-conflict living conditions and allowed discontent with Russia to shine through. Describing sentiment in South Ossetia since the war as euphoria turned to disappointment, Olga Yemelyanova in a March 23 Gazeta.ru internet article quoted residents of Tskhinvali complaining about the lack of aid received, "President" Kokoity's Unity party's inability to distribute existing aid, and the ineffectiveness of reconstruction efforts. In spite of rows of houses of ethnic Georgians burnt down out of what Ossetians called "revenge for 19 years of humiliation," Yemelyanova cited one inhabitant of Akhalgori asserting that not only ethnic Georgians, but also ethnic South Ossetians were leaving South Ossetia for Georgia proper.

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Marking the anniversaries of the war  
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¶3. (SBU) In a March 16 Kommersant article noting the seven-month anniversary of the war, Olga Allenova contended almost no reconstruction had taken place since August 2008. Describing how crops had not been harvested for fear of mines and families wintered in tents or in houses with holes in the walls and no utilities, she related one resident's statement that "Russia is committing one blunder after another. Russia has not saved us, it has saved its interests in the region." According to Allenova, even the reconstruction that had taken place did not alleviate the situation -- Tskhinvali now had two traffic lights, but almost no traffic on its unrepaired roads, while new construction was faulty and cosmetic. Allenova concluded that if the problems with recovery drove South Ossetia to despair, "Russia would have accomplished what Georgia couldn't."

¶4. (SBU) On April 8, Ivan Sukhov in Vremya Novostei marked the eight-month anniversary of the war describing high

unemployment and empty roads in South Ossetia, with people afraid to talk for fear of repercussions. Suggesting the pipeline project to supply natural gas from Russia was a major source of kickbacks, Sukhov reported accusations that Russian officials had repeatedly hindered the allocation of reconstruction funds. Sukhov also hinted at possible fraud in the May 31 legislative elections in South Ossetia, where voting lists have 50,000 names for a region of 30,000, and more than twice as many passports have been issued as there are inhabitants, causing even Russian border guards not to accept South Ossetian passports as means of identification.

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Russian troop presence  
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¶5. (SBU) In an article published March 16, Irina Gordenko from Novaya Gazeta described increasingly negative South Ossetian attitudes toward the Russian forces in the region. While the troops' living conditions had improved from living in tents to wooden houses in Tskhinvali, a former Russian army captain complained that the South Ossetians no longer viewed the Russians as "liberators." According to him, South Ossetians accused the Russian forces of stealing food, money, and small items such as mobile phones, while getting into so many fights with the locals that the Russian forces now avoided encounters with the armed and vengeful South Ossetian militia. Citing hazing and the loss of preferential payments to the troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia for serving outside Russia's borders or in a war zone, Gordenko depicted a thoroughly demoralized army affected by Prime Minister Putin's February 25 decree number 169, which stated that

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Russia had rewarded the troops for bringing peace to Georgia, and in Gordenko's words "no longer owed the soldiers anything."

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Allegations of IDPs losing their housing  
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¶6. (C) Some of the developments could have an impact on efforts in Geneva to improve the post-conflict situation. Vremya Novostei's Ivan Sukhov told us that some housing in areas previously inhabited by ethnic Georgians was now being given to Russian "specialists for ethnic relations" (Note: He apparently meant FSB agents. End note). Sukhov had observed other South Ossetians breaking down the walls of houses of displaced ethnic Georgians in order to use the bricks for their own houses.

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Comment  
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¶7. (C) As experts have told us, Russia asserts the need to "protect South Ossetia," but does not want to be responsible for it. It would appear that the Russian army is doing little to bring tangible benefits to South Ossetia. While the Russian press has begun to vent criticism of Russia's handling of the post-conflict situation, we note that such articles have so far been limited to more liberal publications.

RUBIN